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REALIZATION OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Written statement submitted by North South XXI, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[15 July 1997]

1. It was only 100 years ago that an Austrian physician, Albert Niemann, described how to isolate one of the 14 alkaloids of the coca leaf, calling it "cocaine". It may be compared to the theine in tea or the caffeine in coffee (to produce 1 kilo of cocaine chlorohydrate requires more than 1 tonne of coca leaves). Initially utilized for medicinal purposes (Freud studied its properties for years, and great European physicians used it to treat alcoholics), it later came to be used in western countries as a drug, which on account of its harmful effects has been quite legitimately outlawed. As with many other things, the demand for narcotic drugs in the industrialized world brings with it perversion and crime, the cost of which is expected to be borne by the peoples of the third world. The inclusion of the coca leaf on the list of narcotic drugs (Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961) has led to coca users being confused with drug addicts, coca producers with drug-traffickers, and coca with cocaine.

2. The indigenous peoples of the Andes (Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, northern Chile and Argentina) for many centuries used the coca leaf for its highly nutritional and curative powers, which have been proven by recent scientific research, but never, until today, did they use it as a drug. In Andean culture, the coca leaf has always played a very important role in the spiritual, medical and trade spheres. It helps to counter harsh climatic conditions through its protein and vitamin content and is a powerful symbol of man's attachment to Mother Earth (Pachamama). Every civilization has developed its own symbolic intermediaries (such as the vine in western cultures).

3. Coca production, which was always in stride with the natural requirements of indigenous peoples and is today one of the sole sources of livelihood for the vast majority of small farmers (most of whom used to work in mines that have since been shut down), has increased in recent years, along with the demand for drugs in the United States and Europe, under the sponsorship of major drug-traffickers usually in league with Governments. It is important to recall that local peasants are forced to produce for the drug traffic, on account of their extremely difficult economic circumstances.

4. The United States, using the fight against drugs as a pretext, and instead of combating its own users and traffickers, is penalizing indigenous producers by outlawing production and advocating the eradication of coca crops with toxic products that cause major environmental damage. They also take advantage of these activities to set up military bases in the producer countries in order covertly to monitor "difficult" zones and conduct a so-called anti-guerrilla war.

5. While on the one hand an attempt is being made to outlaw the coca leaf, on the other the materials required for the production of coca paste are not outlawed. Without them, the leaf cannot be synthetized into a drug. To produce 1,000 tonnes of coca paste, which is what is needed to meet the worldwide annual demand (800 tonnes of pure cocaine), requires 9 million litres of kerosene, 5 million litres of sulphuric acid, 2.5 tonnes of quicklime, 496 tonnes of carbide, 2.5 tonnes of toilet paper, 1 million litres of acetone or toluene and 1.25 million litres of glue. These highly toxic products, in which the coca leaves are macerated, are used and discarded without any precaution in the rivers and soils. Most of them are found not in South America but in industrialized countries.

6. We propose that support and assistance should be provided for research on other alternatives, while at the same time the Andean reality of the coca leaf should be respected. It would be fairer and more constructive for the peasant producers of the Andes not only to benefit from an ancestral asset of their culture, but also to derive legal profit from the manufacture of many natural products made from coca leaf (tea, tonics, toothpaste, shampoo, dietary products and natural medicines, including products to help drug addicts overcome withdrawal symptoms). These two rights (the right to culture and the right to exploit natural resources) are embodied in the draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons.

7. Consequently, we request:

The revision, in the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), of the article concerning the coca leaf, with a view to decriminalizing its production and the trade in its natural by-products, thus putting an end to the harm done to indigenous peasant producers and allowing them to export and sell these products and derive a fair profit from them;

Respect for the principle of non-interference by Powers for whom combating the drug traffic is only a pretext for justifying interference in the internal affairs of States;

The development of multilateral aid and cooperation with the indigenous peoples of the Andes so that they will be able to diversify their production.